

CHAPTER VII

DEATH AND FUNERARY CEREMONIES

WHEN a male or female Muslim is dying it is the custom to give him or her some water to drink. So far, despite careful inquiries, I have discovered no definite belief associated with the practice; all that I have been told is that it is a custom that must always be observed. It may originally, perhaps, have been a purificatory or vivificatory rite. In certain parts of Egypt it is the custom for some of the people sitting or standing near a person who is *in extremis* to squeeze his or her body with their hands, in order to force the soul out of it. Men do this for a man and women for a woman. When death has actually taken place the eyes and mouth of the deceased are closed, and the legs drawn down straight and laid close together. The body is then washed, the water for this purpose being obtained, if possible, from a mosque or from some sacred well or pool connected with a sheikh. In Upper Egypt the corpse may be washed by a *fikh*, who takes as payment all the clothes of the deceased, and also the remains of the soap used in the washing.

As Egypt is a very hot country burial takes place very shortly after death. For instance, if a death has occurred in the morning or early afternoon the funeral takes place the same day. On the other hand, if death resulted from some injury due to accident or an act of violence burial is not permitted till the Government doctor and police officials have made full investigations.

If some one is dying in the village the news soon spreads, and friends and relations flock in crowds to the house. The moment the breath is out of the body female relatives and a number of professional mourners begin to shriek and scream (Fig. 50). Many of them leave the house of death and perambulate the village seven times, uttering the while piercing cries, and waving handkerchiefs, usually black, blue, or green in colour, as they go along. This perambulation of wailing women is not, anyhow at the present day, consciously associated with any idea of driving the spirit or

or like a silver thread in the distance. He resorts to it more often than to his fellowmen. He does not pray to it, as his ancestors did, but he constantly visits it. The Nile is in his blood. There is the same intimate bond between the Nile and the fellaheen as between the sea and the fishermen of Brittany. They even call it *el Bahr*, the sea, and their fields they call "shores" (*el rif* — plural *el ariaf* — the usual word for the Egyptian countryside) ("a). At High Nile they believe women to be more fertile and men more healthy; marriages are most often celebrated at this season. If a child is sickly or ill, his mother takes him on the Nile at this time, and makes him throw sweets and dates into the clayey waters, with the words "Oh Nile, let my strength grow like your depth". A dying fellah, before he breathes his last, is given a final draught of its living water. F 823

In the Coptic Mass there is the following prayer: "Vouchsafe, O Lord, to bless this year the water of the river. By Thy grace bring it to due height. Gladden the face of the land, that the fields may have water and the crops be multiplied." F 822 823

The silt of the Nile has its part also in the rites of life and death. The fellâha, when her time is coming, crawls to the brink of the water and takes up a handful of moist earth, which she will swallow at the time of delivery to ensure a successful birth. F 843 844 261

When the *mizayen* cuts the child's hair for the first time, the hair ceremoniously cut off is not flung to the winds, but carefully rolled into a ball of earth. F 852

Professional mourners bedaub their breasts, heads, and arms with mud as a sign of grief. The body is put into the earth without either coffin or clothes. F 764

The fellaheen bury in the earth the jar containing their savings, and charms which they wish to take effect. Every birth affects the soil; the after-brith is buried inside the house, and the umbilical cord, wrapped up in a little bag with a few grains of corn, is dug into the father's field. F 454 789 844

The fruits of the earth are still more closely involved in this peasant mysticism. The analogies between vegetable life and the peasants' own extremely physical existence make them believe in an interplay of fertility between the two. F 842 812

The ceremonies of the seventh day, when the newly-born child is washed and given a name, often include the following F 553 852

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with beauty-spots, her tender limbs can scarcely support all her heavy ornaments of gold and silver, her arinlets, bracelets, anklets, crown, hair-chains, and other trinkets. The silken jacket falls smoothly over her breast, that scarcely as yet shows any swelling. The doll-bride blushes in childish modesty, and, instead of her husband, not seldom wishes—her playthings. He, however, intimates to her, in the name of God, the all-merciful, that he has become her husband. If the bridegroom has had reason to be satisfied with his bride, the women who have been in attendance on the pair utter cries of pleasure, and the joy passes through the whole house, and extends to the people collected below. Ceremonies very similar were customary in the middle ages also among our German forefathers.

Early on the morning after this "night of access" there is much congratulation in the house of feasting; the guests receive coffee, and are sprinkled with rose-water, which they rub on their hair, their beards, faces, and hands. The ancient Egyptians used to anoint themselves with ointments, but this is no longer practised. On this day the bridegroom takes a walk in the open air in his red coat with some of his comrades and sings pious songs; for three days or more he goes about without engaging in any occupation, and at this time displays an extraordinarily serious mien.

A man that marries a second time invites only his nearer relatives and friends, or a scribe, to the betrothal feast in his house. Thereupon the marriage contract is drawn up, the dowry paid, a prayer uttered, and he has now free access to his betrothed.

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A shrill cry, as loud as the female falsetto can produce, pierces the air, first one, then another, then several, then ever so many. A soul has departed. The cry was the wail of sorrow uttered by the women concerned, and at the same time the signal which brings up crowds of women to lament along with them. On the street, before the house of mourn-